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“Stitch for Stitch, You Are Remembering”: Knitting and Crochet as Material Memorialization

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Abstract

This article explores the role of the crafts of knitting and crochet in memorialization, an aspect of how contemporary knitting culture uses craft as a means of connecting with the sacred. It argues that knitting and crochet as material memorialization is part of wider trends in late modernity: the sacralization of the family; the preoccupation with the past; and the seeking of connection with that which is perceived to have been lost. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it discusses participants’ craft projects used to honour maternal heritage, uncover marginalized histories, make space for reflection in commemoration and grieving, maintain the presence of the dead, and provide tactile comfort in the face of loss.

Keywords

commemoration, craft, crochet, knitting, memorialization, mourning

Introduction

The craft of knitting has surged in popularity in the twenty-first century, as a leisure activity, art-form, and source of income. For many practitioners, knitting is personally, socially, and politically meaningful, sustaining and transformative. The last two decades have seen much

valuable scholarship on the relation of knitting to social capital and personal wellbeing (Corkhill 2014; Duffy 2007; Gauntlett 2010; Mayne 2016; Minahan and Cox 2007; Orton-Johnson 2014; Riley, Corkhill and Morris 2013); and my own research has discussed contemporary knitting culture in terms of religion and spirituality (see Fisk 2012, 2018). However, an under-explored topic is how knitting—as both process and product—may function as a ritualizing and rooting of relationships, traditions, and places.¹ I consider this aspect of contemporary knitting practice as the pursuit of *sacred connections*; in other words, how knitting is used to connect with that which is held to be most important, or sacred. This conception is informed by understandings of the sacred (after Durkheim) as the culturally-constructed “forms [that] people take to be absolute realities that have claims over their lives” (Lynch 2012, 15). In claiming that knitting and crochet sometimes works as *ritual*, I am drawing on an understanding of ritual as embodied, intentional practices that create a differentiation from less fundamentally significant (or sacred) activities (Bell 1992, 74, 90-92): a *making special* of everyday life.

Macrocosmic themes are reflected within the microcosm of the knitting world, and the study of contemporary craft practice may intimate the kinds of things that are sacred—worthy of ritualizing—in late modernity: love and family, cultural heritage, political commitments, and the natural world. The particular sacred connection I focus on in this article is knitting and crochet as part of a process of mourning and commemoration. The practice of knitting as memorializing demonstrates reactions to modernity which are in themselves distinctly modern: the sacralization of the family; the preoccupation with the past and the seeking of connection with that which is “lost”. These are explored in the present article in terms of two intertwined strands of memorialization in the modern west: the shift to preserving “continuing bonds” (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996) with dead loved ones, and the “memory boom” with its turn to the past and “heritage.” In the words of Tony Walter, “postmodern humans march into the future connected to and enriched by, not detached from, their (diverse) pasts and their dead” (Walter 2018, 6).

This article is based on fieldwork with knitters in central Scotland (with participants also hailing from Austria, Canada, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the United States), audio recorded and transcribed by myself. In October 2016, I conducted sixteen 60-90 minute interviews with eighteen knitters, recruited via a notice on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Ravelry), meeting participants in cafes, at their place of work in a couple of instances, and at my university office. At this stage of the

fieldwork, the interviews were intended to be reasonably representative examples of what knitters talk about when they talk about knitting, and so these sessions were largely unstructured. The only formally structured element was that participants were asked in advance to bring with them a knitted object they had made that held particular significance to them. About half did so, showing me shawls, sweaters and socks that I could touch, admire, and photograph (for the purposes of aiding my memory, rather than publication), while others showed me photographs, either on their phones or on their Ravelry project page. In considering these “most meaningful” knit and crochet projects, I began to develop the concept of knitting sacred connections, of the prevalence of craft as a way of connecting with aspects of life regarded as most important. Two interviews were especially generative of this theme, and will be explored at some length in this article: one with Miranda, a 57-year-old office manager and lead organizer of the Somme Observed Community Knitting project; the other with Janet (48), living with chronic depression and recently bereaved of her mother. I found Janet’s significant project to be particularly moving. This was due to the pride and joy she exuded when she got it out of her bag and laid it in on the table in front of me, as well as the meanings and relationships imbricated in it by her explanation of its importance:

My son’s a [bag]piper and Mum always wanted him to have a made-to-measure handmade kilt for his 21st birthday. And, unfortunately, Mum passed away in May of 2015, very suddenly. And my sister and I spoke about it, and I said that I would like to honor Mum’s wish [...] And then I thought “That’s a shame, because he knows what he’s getting for his 21st, he’s not going to have anything really to open [...] And then I thought “Hmm, I could do him a pair of handknit kilt socks!” So again, me being me, couldn’t do a simple sock, went for the most complicated pattern I could find! So, it means a lot to me because it’s the most technical knit that I’ve ever done. It’s also because it’s for my son, and I’m just really really hoping he likes it! But it also has a bit of my mum in it, as well. So that’s why it means such a lot to me.

<Figure 1: kilt sock one>*Example of the kilt sock pattern* © Anne Carroll Gilmour

Janet’s words about the kilt sock—just a single sock because she had not yet finished the second one—distil the several aspects of knitting as marking sacred connections: a gift for a loved one, intended to mark the rite of passage of a 21st birthday, related also to the traditions of their Scottish cultural context. It encompasses another significant relationship, that with her

mother; the sock's "ha[ving] a bit of my mum in it" is especially meaningful because she has passed away, thus it is a form of remembrance for a loved one who has died.

Wishing to further explore the role of craft in connecting with what is regarded as most meaningful, in March 2018 I held a "Making Meaning Research Stall" at the Edinburgh Yarn Festival. Based at a table in the large social space at the self-described "UK's Premier Urban Hand-Knitting Show," I conducted interviews of an average of ten minutes with twenty-two participants. My approach for this stage of the fieldwork was more explicit: in the information circulated online prior to the festival, and explanatory text displayed at the table, I asked participants to speak to me about "a fibre craft project that is especially meaningful because of its connection to particular people, times, places, and causes". Seven of the interviewees showed me or told me about projects related to memorialization in some way, from the series of knitting patterns Alexandra designed to commemorate her female ancestors uncovered in researching her family history, to the shawl that Judith knitted by her dying mother's hospital bed.

During our short interview, Judith commented on a couple of occasions that this shawl, and its significance to her, was "a bit of a weird one" and unlike the sorts of things other people were telling me about. I assured her that it was not weird, but very helpful, and that I had already heard similar accounts that day. I added that I had anticipated these kinds of stories; however, I had been surprised by the extent to which participants were prepared to talk about them in the context of a yarn festival. We were in a marquee full of hundreds of people, during an extremely busy commercial event with a footfall of several thousand, while seated at a table next to the queue for the coffee bar. Judith responded, "But look, it's a safe space, it's women-dominated". Indeed, there were perhaps a handful of men in the marquee, and women were in the overwhelming majority at the entire festival. This was an aspect of the knitting milieu that made Judith feel it was "safe" to speak about something as deeply personal as the death of her mother; the significance of gender to the perception of knitting groups and shops as supportive social spaces is attested in the literature (Minahan and Cox 2006; Prigoda and McKenzie 2007; O'Sullivan and Richardson 2011). Of course, not only women knit: men and non-binary people were present at the yarn festival, and many men participate in contemporary knitting culture in much the same way as women do. However, it remains the case that "[w]hen one first thinks of knitting, one thinks of women" (Turney 2009, 8), and all the people I interviewed identified as female. The gendered nature of knitting and crochet is an important theme of the scholarship in terms of women's wellbeing and sociality (Adey 2016; Stannard and Sanders 2015) as well as feminist activism (Bratich and Brush 2011; Clarke 2016; Myzelev 2009). As the present

article will explore, gender is also significant to knitting and crochet as memorial practices. Knitting may be a ritualizing of feminist attempts to reconnect with the unsung women of the past. In marking personal loss, the objects and materials of women's everyday lives become a materialization of grief, love, and respect for the departed.

This article is centered on the knit and crochet projects created for mourning and memorializing loved ones, especially mothers and grandmothers. A project that stands in contrast is the collective and public memorialization of the Somme Observed Community Knitting (SOCK). For eight weeks of summer 2016, on the railings in front of Glasgow's People's Palace Museum, hung fifty panels, each consisting of eighty-four 16 cm by 16 cm knit or crochet squares.

<Figure 2: SOCK installation 1>*SOCK installation outside the People's Palace Museum*
©Alisdair Woodburn

This installation of brightly-colored patchwork panels was in commemoration of the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, and in particular the city's three Pals Battalions who took part in the battle that became synonymous with the devastating loss of life of the First World War. Throughout July and August, anyone visiting the museum or passing by it on their way through Glasgow Green could see (indeed, touch) this huge woolly assemblage, which aimed to have one knit or crochet square for each of the 3700 members of the Glasgow Pals Battalions. This commemorative project was community-led: initiated and organised by volunteers belonging to one Glasgow knitting group, who recruited participation from many other craft groups and individuals throughout the local area and beyond.

The public commemorative intention of SOCK project—materializing local history and collective remembrance rather than personal loss—is very different to the individual mourning practices of making shawls, socks and cardigans after the death of a loved one. Yet considering both together further enriches understanding of how knitting is entangled with ways of “living with the past”; how memorialization—the continual process of negotiating “what is remembered, transmuted into narrative, handed on from generation to generation” (Vincent 2013, 1)—is one of the most significant relocations of meaning and the sacred in contemporary secular society. This includes both ritualizing and remembering the families people come from and the relationships that sustain them, and commemorating their public past and collective dead.

My Grand/mother's Knitting

Janet was kind enough to pick me up from the railway station of a small city in Scotland that I had never visited before, and she drove us to the café of the public gardens. She was an expansive and articulate storyteller throughout the interview, which belied the depression and social phobia she has struggled with all her adult life. Janet's response to my first question, "how long have you been knitting?", was the following story:

My mum taught me to knit when I was young, and then—I suppose like most kids—I put it aside and didn't really do anything with it. And then, about 4 years ago now, I suddenly took a notion to start knitting again. And, me being me, couldn't go for a simple pattern: I decided I was going to knit my husband—who's 6ft1!—a jumper. Also it had to be a cable knit jumper [...] I'd got it all knit up, and it was all looking beautiful <pause>. And, he went to try it on, and he couldn't get it over his head. So off it went to the Knitting Hospital, also known as Mum. And she said, "you cast it off too tight at the neck!" [...] My mum—she crochet, but she also did knitting—she crochet from when she was at primary school, so anything that went wrong, it was "Mum...what do I do with this? Mum! What does it mean when it says that?"

When I later asked Janet why she decided to start knitting again when she was in her forties, she explained,

Because I don't work, because of my health, a lot of the time I don't feel that I'm achieving very much, and I think I was looking for something that I could look at and think "I've achieved something" [...] So I thought, "well, Mum's got loads of knitting needles, just try knitting again." And I did, and I've been hooked ever since.

Janet's mother was central to both accounts of her craft practice, as the person who taught her how to knit and crochet, and provided valuable assistance in her early efforts. Learning from a mother and/or grandmother was the case for most of my participants. As Jo Turney explains, "[f]or many people, their first experience of knitting, and of learning to knit, is associated with family and the home," especially since "knitting is a tacit skill passed from one person to another", most often a mother or grandmother: an "intergenerational sharing of knowledge" (2009, 12). Janet's story of the cabled jumper demonstrates how being taught to knit by another person is not an immediate, one-off process: the mothers and grandmothers who may have shown them how to form stitches are also likely to have been repeatedly asked for help in remembering what to do, and untangling knotty problems. The learning and teaching of

knitting is something that takes time and a degree of commitment and intimacy, “an intense, one-to-one experience of learning” (Brooks 2010, 34).

Janet referred to her mother throughout our interview, with various aspects of her crafting coming back to this central relationship. She told her how her mother, a minister’s wife (“babies that got christened in our church used to get a little posy of flowers and a baby jacket”) continued a “family tradition”, in which “any new babies that were born within the family were made what was called a Rafferty Baby Jacket”. Janet’s paternal grandmother, “Gran Rafferty”, a widow with seven children, would crochet a jacket for any child “needing a new cardigan” living on their street in a Scottish west coast town, according to “a pattern that was in her head, it wasn’t written down [...] she used to be able to look at a child and just whip one up, in the right size”. Gran Rafferty later taught her daughter-in-law, Janet’s mother:

So when Gran Rafferty passed, Mum took it on [...] I think it’s nice that there’s that sort of thing that gets passed on that’s not written down. I’ve never seen the pattern anywhere, I’ve never even come across anything that looks vaguely like it, and I just think that it’s nice that that tradition continues. So before Mum’s eyesight got too bad, I said to her “Come on then, you’ve got to teach either [Janet’s sister] or I how to make this baby jacket, so that we can continue this tradition”. So she sat with me and we made one together. But unfortunately we haven’t had a family baby since Mum passed away, I haven’t been able to put it into action yet! But that appeals to me, that tradition of handing down patterns or stories or family tales that get passed from one generation to the next. I like that idea. I suppose continuity. And something that’s—I was gonna say unique to our family, it probably isn’t unique to our family, it’s probably just the pattern that was unique to our family!

Indeed, the traditions of (sometimes unwritten) patterns being made and gifted within families is not unique to Janet’s family, and was mentioned to me by several participants. While an everyday and unpretentious practice, it is nevertheless an intentional enshrining of the family, which speaks to the sacrality of families and their traditions (or myths and rituals) in a wider context.

Philosopher Charles Taylor has identified the crucial significance of immediate family as “ideally a close community of love, in which the members find an important part of their human fulfilment” as a key aspect of modernity (1989, 305). Janet’s account of the Rafferty baby jacket is perhaps indicative of modernity’s increasing intensification of the significance of the nuclear family unit, differentiated from “more distant kin” or the local community as discussed by Taylor. While her grandmother made a jacket for any child in the neighborhood

that needed one, and her mother knitted for every child baptized into her husband's church, Janet felt she had not yet had the chance to put the tradition into action because "we haven't had a family baby since Mum passed away"; there has been a shift across the generations in who is and is not regarded as kin.² Taylor's historical narrative of the modern shift to "affirmation of ordinary life" (1989) interweaves with that of secularization, and historian John Gillis draws an explicit comparison: "We not only live with families but depend on them to do the symbolic work that was once assigned to religious and communal institutions" (1996, xv). As Gillis emphasizes, this symbolic work is particularly contingent upon women:

the opportunity and the burden of producing family myths, rituals and images have passed to the domestic group itself. Today each family is its own symbolic universe, its own cosmos, its own community. Its ritual experts are more likely to be women than men, for the production and consumption of modern family cultures is a highly gendered affair (1996, xviii).

Knitting, crochet and other textile crafts are examples of the gendered ritual work of maintaining and passing on family traditions and skills. A "sense of wanting to pass it down the generations" was important to interview participant Carla (42). She told me about the sessions she ran at a nearby community centre, teaching children (including her own) woolcrafts such as knitting, spinning and weaving. The project was borne out of disappointment at not being allowed to bring her children with her to her local craft group: while she had expected that the group's "older ladies" would "want to pass on the skills of their craft", it seemed to her they intended the group for "chit-chat time" rather than having young children present. This "spurred me on to think "well, I'd like to do that, I'd like to pass on my skills: is there something that I could do myself?"" Later in the interview, Carla explicitly linked teaching crafts to her children with memories of knitting with her mother and grandmother:

Nana [...] passed away before our kids came along—but she had thought that we would have children much before we did, and had been making baby things, so when I eventually did get a baby, it was produced out of a bottom drawer for me, which was lovely. [...] So yeah, I suppose that's really my—a sense of wanting to pass it down the generations.

In popular culture, knitting has long been predominately associated with women (usually older women), particularly grandmothers, mothers and aunts making gifts to clothe

their families. Larissa Brown's 2011 book *My Grandmother's Knitting* collects designers' patterns and reflections inspired by "a grandmother or grandfather, a family member". The book is framed as a response and refutation to a particular phrase:

Throughout our knitting world, there lurks the refrain "it's not your grandmother's knitting," meant to imply that our grandmothers were unsophisticated knitters [...] This sentiment deprives us from really seeing knitting through our grandmothers' eyes [...] It discounts our grandparents' skill—in many cases developed over an entire lifetime—and also their style, individuality, and grace. I hope this book will convince you—or just remind you—that the knitting we do *is* our grandmother's knitting. (Brown 2011, 8, emphasis in original).

Indeed, knitting and crochet as a way of paying tribute to the skills inherited from mothers and grandmothers recurred throughout my fieldwork. During our interview, Hazel (54) was working on miniature Christmas stockings knitted from small scraps of colorful acrylic yarn, from the knitting basket that her mother gave her when she took up knitting again. Hazel's mother taught her to knit, and she knitted from childhood through to her early twenties, taking it up again after a decades-long gap. Her mother could no longer knit or crochet due to arthritis, but Hazel recalled the pram blankets her mother would make whenever one of Hazel's friends has a baby, and "she crocheted a wee pram blanket when my nephew was born, six years ago, and I think that was the last time she crocheted". Hazel was not sure whether the wee balls of yarn she had been given were leftovers from the pram blankets, but noted that

they're those sort of colors, and I just thought it was a nice thing to do. I quite liked the idea of using the wool that my mum had given me to make these wee things for my family as presents.

I was reminded of Hazel's tiny Christmas stockings, made from the oddments left over from her mother's crochet, when reading Brown's words on her conversation with knitting designer Pam Allen:

even after a long career at the forefront of the knitting industry, she still loves the simple, creative challenge of a bag of yarn scraps [...] Pam inherited this sensibility from her grandma, for whom a quilt was something satisfying and beautiful made by juxtaposing leftovers—a way to save moments in time by plucking memories from the scrap bin. Pam calls it "saving pieces of history" (Brown 2011, 17).

The meaningful project knitted by Solan (49) is another example of "saving pieces of history". Originally from Shetland, but now living in the central belt of the Scottish mainland,

Solan finds that knitting Fair Isle and Shetland lace patterns, and participating in associated online groups, enables her to “feel more connected with the community that I left behind”. At Edinburgh Yarn Festival she was wearing a cardigan with a Fair Isle patterned yoke.

<Figure 3: Shetland cardigan> *Example of Fair Isle handknitting* ©Anna Fisk

Solan explained the significance of her cardigan:

the pattern means a lot to me—I lost my mum about six years ago, and she’s the one that taught me to knit [...] because my mum had knitted commercially and it was something she’d done for the family, it was something I was so used to seeing happening wherever I went. You know, family, friends of my mother’s would all sit and knit. So it was something as a four-year-old I wanted to join in with. [...] And then six years ago I lost my mum. And I got all of her knitting material when she passed. So I got her stash, I got her books, I got her knitting belt. And in one of the little sort of school jotters with squared paper in it, I found this pattern, that she’d charted out. I don’t know when—20 years ago, 40 years ago [...] the pattern was a way of reconnecting with my mum, and with, you know, the generations that went before.

Solan’s cardigan was knitted from a pattern of her mother’s that she had found after she died; although most of the yarn had been purchased recently on a trip to Shetland, “some of the wool’s actually either mine or my mum’s stash, that we’ve had for years. So there’s, you know, another connection”. The leather belt she used to knit the cardigan—“because we’re Shetlanders we use a knitting belt”—had belonged to her mother and was “handmade by my grandfather, so it’s got, you know, even more sort of family connections within it”. Making the cardigan was a way of celebrating and connecting with how Solan’s craft practice—the knowledge of how to form stitches, the materials of knitting, and the patterns—had been inherited from her mother, and in a wider sense from the past and present communal tradition of Shetland knitting.

In both scholarly and popular discourse on women and domestic crafts since the second wave of feminism, there is a recurrent theme of how quilting, embroidery and knitting provide material witness of the lives of women of earlier generations: “the voice of a huge section of the population who do not feature in history books and who are otherwise silent” (Freeman 1987, 55). Writing in the same volume as Freeman, *Women and Craft*, Sue Scott argues, “[w]e should treasure these tiny works of craft created by our mothers and grandmothers in time salvaged from a life of hard work, time used to create something of beauty for their own

pleasure” (Scott 1987, 26). Here the act of knitting becomes a material feminist ritualizing of the search for connection with the uncelebrated women of past generations. The 21st century’s knitting ‘revival’ has in part been connected to third-wave feminism (see Groeneveld 2010; Myzelev 2009), with the popular book that led the way in encouraging this resurgence—*Stitch ’n’ Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook* (2003)—written by Debbie Stoller, the then-editor of the feminist magazine *Bust*. In the introduction to her book of knitting techniques and patterns, Stoller wrote of knitting as a source of ancestral connection:

Whenever I would take up the needles I would feel myself connected not only to my own mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, but also to the women who had developed the craft, the women who had known, as I did, the incredible satisfaction and sense of serenity that could come from the steady, rhythmic click-click-click of one’s knitting needles (2003, 9).

This theme is repeated in books for a popular audience exploring the connections between knitting and spirituality: Tara Jon Manning writes in *Mindful Knitting* that learning to knit “provided me with a temporal connection with the women who came before me” (2004, 2); for Susan Gordon Lydon in *The Knitting Sutra*, “with each piece of handwork I do, I connect with the centuries of women who cultivated their inner lives and expressed them through the humble works of their hands” (1997, 5); Rachael Matthews’s *The Mindfulness in Knitting* (2017) devotes a chapter to “Learning from the Past”. This link between knitting the past and spirituality is not coincidental: within contemporary understandings of spirituality as “as that which gives life meaning [...] a sense of something greater” (Gardner 2011, 9), deepening knowledge of one’s ancestry and local history may be a form of connection with “something greater”. Along with Turney (2009), I regard “knitting the past” as part of a wider “memory boom”, explained by Dan Todman as a cultural “reaction to [...] the severing of more localized links to the past, and to the failures of traditional narratives” in post-Christendom; “as identity grows more problematic, so memory becomes more important”. Turney critiques the prevalence of knitting the past as a Romanticized denial of the harsh realities of the pre-industrial age (2009, 47-50), yet I would argue, as a spiritual urge to connect with the past, it is more profound—albeit ambivalently so—than she gives credit for.

Unpicking the Past

The significance of memory and memorialization is paramount in two participants’ projects centered on uncovering and paying tribute to female ancestors’ histories. At EYF,

Lotta (31, from Finland), had with her a shawl she was in the progress of knitting. She explained:

This is something I'm working on at the moment. This is the second of five shawls that I'm knitting. Actually what makes it meaningful to me is the grey yarn here. This yarn is older than I am. It was handspun by my great grandmother, my mother's mother's mother, of the last shearing of their sheep. Then they gave up their sheep, so this was the last batch.

Lotta's great-grandmother preserved three skeins of this special handspun yarn for the rest of her life, and five years after her death it was passed by her daughter onto her own granddaughter, to knit a shawl for her. Lotta had two skeins left after her grandmother's shawl was complete, so it was decided that one would be made for all the female descendants: "we agreed with my grandmother that I'm going to knit a shawl for herself, my mother, my auntie, myself, and then my partner's daughter".

Lotta was the last person I interviewed at EYF, and because the venue was closing up I did not have time to ask her more about the significance of these five shawls, of maternal heritage—"my mother's mother's mother"—about what she was thinking about in the process of making them, or what it meant for her great grandmother to be giving up her sheep. All I have recorded is my admiration of the quality of the expertly handspun yarn, and Lotta's emphasis on Finland's poverty in the period following the Second World War, when this yarn was made. Perhaps it says enough about the role of craft in memory and sacralizing kinship bonds that this 2-ply grey woollen yarn was preserved by its maker for six decades, then taken on by her descendants to create gifts for each female member of the immediate family line.

Earlier that weekend I had more opportunity to ask another interviewee, Alexandra (38), about her motivations in designing a series of knitting patterns "based on or inspired by the lives and stories of the female members of my family", with the collection named "Formidable Women". She had with her a hat that was still on the needles: a three-colour stranded colorwork pattern worked in green, purple and white 4-ply wool, "the suffragette colours", to honor Alexandra's several ancestors who took part in the movement for women's suffrage in the early 20th century. She explained that this was the starting point of her idea for a collection:

I've done quite a bit of family history in the past and my mum is a professional researcher and family historian. So she knew a lot of the stories. And I found them all fascinating, and thought "Well why don't I take that inspiration and work that in wool and stitches?" So yeah, so that's how it started. So the idea came from this one, my suffragette ancestors; it then went off in different directions and I've got various other

completed ones. But I've come back—I've been going round giving some talks about my suffragette ancestors recently, so I decided it was time to knit up my hat design.

Alexandra then brought out an apple-green knitted lace shawl, which she explained “was inspired by the story of another great great grandmother, who was a Polish Jewish refugee, who fled the pogroms in the mid-nineteenth century, and ended up in Birmingham”. The shawl “told the story” of Alexandra’s ancestor both through the materials she had chosen and stitch patterns:

I'd used the St. Kilda Blacker yarn, which takes a very ancient and rare breed of the Shetland Soay and Borerary. And I wanted to take that yarn which has a real sense of place and ancientness. And yet those sheep too were immigrants at one point. They've been here a long time, but not—you know, not that long in the great scheme of things. Humans brought them in, but they've settled and become rooted in that place and developed their own sort of speciality in a way. So I was thinking of the story of my great great grandmother who.... fled for unpleasant reasons, rather than being brought for positive reasons. But yet she, she adapted to her new surroundings; she chose her own path in many ways.

The stitch patterns symbolized the different elements of her journey: “horseshoe lace”; “the purl lines here to me represent the train tracks she travelled on. And the wavy lace at the bottom, the sea journey”. Thus the shawl as a whole ‘represented her journey but also her settling and establishing herself in her new surroundings’. Another shawl, one that Alexandra did not have with her for our interview, was made for her own mother “for her 70th birthday. And that represented her mother: I took various elements of her life that were particularly important, and I sort of wove them into a pattern”.

Alexandra described the whole project as “a lot of fun!”, but also reflected on it having some profound personal resonance: “it's been a really interesting way of just exploring those women's stories and thinking about where some of those elements echo in my life, where they're different. But that sense of who you are as a member of your family”. When I asked her why she wanted to knit objects relating to her ancestors, she replied,

Ah <pause> Because I wanted to tell their stories. Whether it would be the active suffragettes in York, or religious refugees, or hardworking Victorian laundresses, and the various other stories I found. I found they were really interesting stories and I wanted to tell them in some way. And I could give talks about some of them, I could write about them, and I may well do so. But as a knitter I also wanted to express that with wool.

This desire to “weave a pattern” of the “stories” of family history through “wool and stitches” demonstrates how craft is used as a way of ritualizing connection with the sacred, including the relationships between the self, place, and the past. The process of discovering and creating a narrative order out of these stories is important, but designing and making knitted textiles from them gives an additional, materialized layer to this engagement.

The Somme Observed Community Knitting project similarly involves a ritualized response to histories with which the participants felt a personal connection, and in which specifically women’s history plays some role. Miranda’s origin story for the project was focused on a particular place. Her regular knitting group discovered that the building of the arts center café, the Tramway, where they met once a week had been “one of the main recruiting centres for one of these Pals battalions”. According to the project’s publicity materials,

This sparked a desire to commemorate the involvement of all three Glasgow Pals Battalions in the Battle of the Somme [...] Knitting was an obvious link as women at home were encouraged to knit for their loved ones and others fighting at the front.

Not only was this commemoration rooted in their particular city, it was also connected with the very building in which the group met once a week to knit together. In the course of the project, Miranda and other core participants engaged with research into the history of Glasgow and the First World War. Some of this was disseminated on information boards displayed with the installation, as well as postcards that were free for viewers to take away and perhaps return by post with their own written reflections.

<Figure 4: SOCK installation 3> *Information board* ©Alisdair Woodburn

Process of Remembering

Researching the local history of the war was a crucial part of SOCK’s project of memorialization that was as much about the *process* as the finished *product* of symbol or ceremony. From Miranda’s tireless negotiations with the local authorities, funding applications, and publicizing of the project, to the countless hours the knitting group spent collecting, arranging, and assembling the finished squares, to participants spending thirty minutes or so crocheting one or two squares, SOCK was about spending time, effort and skill in a long and involved process of commemorating. This continued after the installation was completed and on display: the core participants had a rota ensuring that every day one person would check on the installation, and that later another person would mend any damage to it.

As well as disseminating their local history research, the public education aspect of SOCK included free knitting and crochet lessons for sixty people across several sessions in various venues around Glasgow. When I asked Miranda about the purpose of the craft teaching aspect of the project, she answered, “it was an important part of the project that as many people as wanted to get involved and be able to contribute in commemoration should”. Thinking about the project as providing a way of being involved in a process of commemoration, as well as a visible, material symbol, later on in the conversation I asked:

You also said that [teaching crochet] was about wanting to enable people to commemorate it [...] Do you think it’s about the process of knitting things that they’re for this purpose, that they’ll be thinking about it while they’re knitting it?

Miranda: Yes, that did happen because I got a lot of response when people sent in their finished squares [...] saying “I sat and thought about my grandfather” or “my great grandfather and memories of him”. And “because there’s so much about World War One on the television just now I just had time to reflect on it and think about it”, so it really did help people to do that. [...] which was the reason we were doing it, it was really, really touching. Some of them would make you cry, I’m tearing up now, thinking about a couple of them, thinking about their relatives who were there. And about a lady who had just been to Ypres for one of the commemorations and she said “We’ve just got to do something. And all I can do is knit, so I’m so pleased to be able to knit to do something about this. Because we mustn’t forget, we mustn’t forget, because it was such an awful thing”.

Knitting and crochet take time—at least 30 minutes for a proficient knitter to make just one 6-inch square. The arms, hands, eyes, and mind are all engaged in what is thus a long-term sensory process of memorialization. There is also a material product “to show” for the time spent; as material memorials, knit and crochet objects physically manifest the time spent as well as providing a corporeal focal point for memory. Thus knitting in this context may be understood as memorial ritual.

The time-intensive physical process as providing opportunity for reflection in memorializing relates also to textile craft’s use in grief-work following a bereavement. In reference to embroidery, Rozsika Parker comments that the “time taken to complete a memorial sampler or picture allowed a period of mourning, and possible acceptance of separation and loss” (Parker 1984, 38); quilting is another domestic craft utilized in processes of grieving and mourning (see Carocci 2010; Collins 2015). Women’s historical and traditional crafting of

commemorative objects (see Tobin and Goggin 2013) seems to be continued in a contemporary, everyday context in knitters' memorial practices. As seen in the example of Solan's cardigan, bereaved knitters select, preserve and repurpose the objects and materials made and used by deceased loved ones, often those foremothers with whom their knowledge and love of the craft is associated. Janet told me how she had spent some of the money she inherited from her mother on a spinning wheel:

I wanted to buy something that I could remember Mum by, but that I could use. And I thought, "Ah, I could get a spinning wheel". Because, as I say, Mum—all her days—knit, crocheted, and I thought "Well that's sort of continuing that sort of thing". You know, whilst it's sitting in the room I can look at it and think "That came from Mum", and when I'm using it I can think "Well, it's sort of a natural progression", from knitting with wool to wanting to make wool in order to knit. And I think she would approve.

Others created objects as an intentional mourning practice. At EYF, Nalle (44, originally from Germany but now living in Iceland) showed me a bright green shawl she knitted during the period around her mother-in-law's funeral. She described how the process of knitting the shawl was a "soothing" way of "coming through grief" due to the simple and repetitive lace pattern, "just something mindless to knit along"; "this stitching is really so...contemplative [...] nothing really to think heavily about the pattern, so mind can wander". She thus found the time spent knitting it opened up a space for remembering her mother-in-law—"stitch for stitch, you are remembering"—for thinking about the person she was:

She was herself a huge knitter, and she had a knitting machine and she did all her handicraft. I thought, "Oh she would have loved this green". She loved so much seeing me knitting, and I had this remembrance about the time we spent. And it was just very <pause> difficult in the beginning, because really I saw her the whole time, like sitting, "oh yes this is lovely, this is your color, oh I like..."! She would speak to me! And as I got along, I was just...feeling good, in that way...I really love to remember her, all of the times we had [...] this is very much her, in the shawl.

Materials of Mourning

As well as using the process of knitting to aid "the grieving process", Nalle's finished shawl became a way of maintaining the presence of the deceased in a material form. She wore it frequently because the color matched much of her clothing, but also as "a nice way of feeling like she's with me"; "having something in hands that belongs somehow to her" [*sic*]. Both

Nalle and Solan were “drop-in” interviewees; we had not arranged the interview prior to their attendance at Edinburgh Yarn Festival, and their shawl and cardigan were meaningful projects they just happened to have with them.

These well-used and well-loved knitted objects perhaps lend support to the scholarly thesis of the “pervasive” presence of the dead in the 21st century. The latter 20th century was dominated by a model of the “sequestered dead” in modernity, in which mourning customs, therapeutic approaches, and the bodies of the dying and the dead, are distanced—both spatially and affectively—from the lives of the living (following Ariès 1974). While acknowledging that “sequestered” practices remain significant, contemporary scholarship on death and bereavement emphasizes a social shift to maintaining “continuing bonds” (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996) with the deceased (Howarth 2007; Maddrell 2013; Walter 2018). Continued relationships with the dead, and the sense of their enduring presence in absence, are given material form in a variety of ways beyond the churchyard burial headstone. The “[i]nnovative spaces and practices [that] have emerged in the face of weakened common rites of memorialization and grieving” (Maddrell 2013, 510) include memorial tattoos, trees, domestic shrines of photographs and special objects, and stone cairns at treasured beauty spots (see Hallam and Hockey 2001; Maddrell and Sidaway 2010; Maddrell 2013); the knitted projects discussed by my participants are further examples of such “vernacular” memorials. They are objects that are special—made by hand with skill—yet, at the same time, everyday. They are carried with the bereaved owner; public in the sense of being on display on the wearer’s body, yet also private in that their relation to the deceased and to mourning is not obvious from the object itself. Yet their material properties—color, tactility and function—remain significant.

At Edinburgh Yarn Festival, Judith told me that she often wore her meaningful project, another shawl,³ also green, also lace. It was not originally intended as a memorial object, but began as a project that “just so happened to be what was on my needles” when her mother was dying in hospital, a couple of months prior to our interview. Judith’s grief was still ‘very raw, the whole loss thing, it’s something I’m finding difficult’ but she wanted to tell me about the shawl in the hope that “sharing and getting things off your chest” would be “cathartic”:

So I knitted a shawl, while my mother was dying. And that sounds a little bit macabre, doesn’t it? But actually I found it one of the most comforting garments I’ve made. It wasn’t so very long ago actually. <pause> Yeah, I think when I hold it and feel it, I remember spending this really lovely time with her, when she was dying. And I remember her feeling the wool, and what I’d knitted, and her saying how soft it was.

And talking about her own knitting stories as well. And yeah, a very difficult time, but having something to share, it was quite happy, and in all that, to have something happy, it was good.

Knitting the shawl out of yarn that was “particularly soft and a really lovely color” provided “something that feels quite natural, and colourful, and beautiful” in the context of the “grim”, “sterile environment” and “very clinical atmosphere” of the hospital. Judith valued that in her mother’s final days she had “something that she could—*<breaks off>* I could see her holding it, and feeling it in her fingers”. Following the death of her mother, for Judith the completed shawl bears the memories of that special, final time with her mother, and its softness and color is a comfort:

I have this piece of knitting now that I can hold, and touch, and feel, and all that kind of tactile stuff. It’s really amazing how, how although it’s attached to quite a sad event, actually what it brings back is that memory of the last few days where we were chatting, and still connected and *<pause>* it’s good. [...] in the wearing of it, and the using of it, and it being very familiar, it kind of—*<breaks off>* it makes it ok.

When I asked a question to clarify that the shawl was in everyday use rather than set aside for special memorial practice, Judith emphasized “it’s not a macabre getting it out to be a bit mournful, it’s more having a little piece of that memory, to take around with me, and it’s good”. Similarly, Nalle had chosen bright colours not usually associated with mourning for her “mother-in-law-shawl”:

And I wanted this very colorful edge, I had this in mind quite a long time as well. She wouldn’t like sitting us around weeping all day. She *<inaudible>* quite a practical person! “Life goes on, and so it is, and just move on”!

The colors resonated with Nalle’s memories of her mother-in-law: “I know she would’ve liked the green [...] the colors were so clear, in Iceland. Really blue blue sky if it’s blue, and the grass just pops out in May and it’s green!”

<Figure 5: green shawl> Knitted lace green shawl ©Anna Fisk

Bright colors—and ultimate practicality—were also central features of the SOCK project. The installation was essentially a series of woolly blankets, later donated to charitable

causes such as Erskine Homes for veterans. Thus the SOCK installation's material qualities are rather unusual in the context of war memorialization. While some of the panels utilize the symbols of commemoration, particularly of the First World War (poppies, crosses, doves for peace, flags)—with these squares and panels being those that involved more thought and a higher degree of skill on the part of the makers—on the whole they are simple knit or crochet squares. Thus the aesthetic is homely—even jolly—rather than the austere, sombre war memorials to which one is accustomed. In many ways the SOCK project went *with* the conventional grain of First World War remembrance since the first decades after the events, using the language of the “sacrifice” of “the fallen”, as well as the imperative not to forget (see Winter and Sivan 2000). Yet it departed from these conventions in its material form. As well as being colorful, the SOCK installation was made of yarn rather than stone, it was soft rather than hard, and touching it was acceptable, indeed encouraged. According to Miranda,

kids would be running up and putting their hands and the mums would be saying “Oh, don't touch”, and we'd say, “No, touch it all you like. Feel this one, it's fluffy”.

As knitted material memorialization, there is a haptic quality to the process of engaging with the piece: feeling the fluffiness of a crochet square between thumb and forefinger is a way of participating in the commemoration more fully than standing back to gaze at a respectful distance.

Intimate engagement with the SOCK memorial perhaps goes beyond the simple addition of the permission to touch, in a way related to Judith's mother's urge, as she lay dying, to stroke her daughter's knitting, and the comfort that Judith later gained from feeling the finished shawl in her hands. As Claire Pajaczkowska (2005) argues, textiles' primary role in human life as clothing means that they are associated with the body, and with touch, in a way unlike other materials; textiles also “continue to bear the connotations of the tactile even when they are not worn or made explicitly for bodily contact” (Pajaczkowska 2005, 243). There are material reasons why textiles have an especially significant role in culture, associated with the earliest of memories, most basic connections, and crucial stages of the human life cycle. Knitted and crochet fabric bring not only an instinctive sense of comfort in the face of grief, but also an embodied sense of presence and memory.

Conclusion

For most of the participants quoted in this article, their knitting and crochet practice is a central aspect of their life and identity—“as a knitter”. These are women who use craft as a way of

materializing and reflecting on things they hold to be most important, or *connecting with the sacred*, in other words, as *ritual*. As seen in the accounts shared above, ritualized remembering of familial relationships is particularly significant, in both maintaining continuing bonds with dead loved ones and finding ways of coping with loss. In mourning maternal figures, knitting and crochet may have a special role because the crafts were learnt from and practised with the deceased foremother/s. There is also in contemporary knitting culture a wider valorization of textile crafts as a means of connecting with the uncelebrated lives of women in history. This is part of the late modern trend of sacralizing the past, seen in the proliferation of interest in genealogy, local heritage, and war remembrance. The knit and crochet projects discussed in this article—celebrating the stories of ancestors, commemorating the Battle of the Somme, and honouring the beloved dead—materialize sacred memory in both embodied process and tactile product.

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¹ With the exception of Donna Bowman's (2016) theological exploration of prayer shawl ministry in the United States, although its focus is on knit and crochet prayer shawls as a Christian practice, rather than wider contemporary knitting culture. While Joanne Turney's *The Culture of Knitting* (2009) includes discussion of the importance of tradition and life stories in knitting practice, she does not consider religious studies categories such as ritual or the sacred.

² I am gratefully indebted to Thomas Hunt for this observation about the Rafferty Baby Jacket and shifting perceptions of kinship.

³ The prevalence of shawls in this article will be due in part to their popularity as knitting and crochet projects, but, as Donna Bowman notes, there is also a particular specialness to shawls in the knitting world because they are not common in contemporary western dress—" [w]e don't see shawls every day; in fact, we rarely see them outside of special occasions [...] no one wears a shawl without meaning to—because almost no one wears a shawl at all. Its material presence, therefore, must mean something" (2016, 4). The way that shawls may be worn—wrapped around the shoulders—was not mentioned by my participants, but their "encircling, with its message of love and presence" (Bowman 2016, 3) is significant in prayer shawl ministry, and may perhaps be an implicit factor in the memory shawls my participants spoke to me about.